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THE MASS MEDIA: A KEY TO PUBLIC SUPPORT OF STRATEGIC  
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# STUDENT ESSAY

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THE MASS MEDIA: A KEY TO PUBLIC  
SUPPORT OF STRATEGIC GOALS

BY

COLONEL WILLIAM J. YAEGER

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Aviation

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The strategic planner faces the difficult task in a free society of gaining and maintaining public support for strategies which are in the national interest. His most effective means of communicating with the public is through the mass media of the nation: newspapers, news magazines, radio, and television. In carrying out the first mission of the Department of Defense, preparing for war, the planner must seek to educate those who work in the media on what the national interests are and how they are to be served. The second mission of DOD is to wage war. The conduit of information from the battlefield is the war correspondent. An appreciation of the role of the war correspondent and the relationship he has had with the U. S. military from the Civil War forward is helpful to the planner who must determine, depending upon the intensity of conflict, whether the war correspondent will approach his job with the attitude of cheerleader or cynic. That attitude may in large part affect the national resolve to see a military goal attained. Research material comes from publications relating to the subject, interviews with those who have worked in this area and the author's personal experience.

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THE MASS MEDIA:  
A KEY TO  
PUBLIC SUPPORT OF STRATEGIC GOALS

Soldiers should not go off to war without  
having the nation behind them.

General Edward C. Meyer  
Former Chief of Staff  
U. S. Army, 1983

The strategic planner in each country has a difficult job. He must determine the best interests of his nation and how they can be carried out with the resources available. In most countries, the planner answers only to his government or to its leader. The will of the people is not a concern.

Such is not the case here in the United States, where the planner, as part of the Department of Defense, must work under a spotlight, accountable to the people for his actions. He must assist the administration in developing national strategies which the public will support. Once committed to a course, he must help maintain the public resolve to see it through.

The mission of DOD is two-fold: to prepare for war and to wage war. In our free society, the military has the means to communicate directly with the citizenry through speakers, forums, and demonstrations. However, under the best of circumstances, such efforts will reach only a fraction of the people that can be communicated with through the mass media: newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. So, where actions must depend upon public support, the mass media must become an overarching consideration for the strategic planner.



Under the 1st Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, the people have a "right to know" what is going on in their government--including the military. That right comes under one of five elements of that amendment, Freedom of the Press. Like the other four, Freedoms of Speech, Religion, Assembly, and the right to petition government for the redress of grievances, press freedom is an individual right. Because it is such, the government has no power to establish qualifications for those who work in news, with the exception of accreditations for the coverage of sensitive information such as progress on the battlefield. However, since most Americans cannot be at their city halls, state houses, or the nation's Capitol, the right is exercised for them vicariously by reporters hired by the mass media. Support for the effort comes not from tax revenue, but rather from advertising.

As the watchdogs over government activities, it falls to the mass media to report the negative, as well as, positive developments in the Defense Department. Many of those reporting about the military have come to their jobs with a healthy skepticism conditioned by training on campuses where defense matters were held in low esteem. Some bring outright cynicism to their jobs. Most are open, inquiring, and objective.

It is important during peacetime that the strategic planner understand these facts. Educating the public to the country's interests and purposes must first depend upon educating those who deliver the news to the public. It must not be an effort which seeks to "use" reporters. Rather it requires a

fresh approach to interesting newspeople--from the grassroots to the nation's capital--in strategic developments. A continual effort must be made to explain U. S. interests in various parts of the world. The people must be made aware of the weaponry and force structure which will be necessary to carry out and protect those interests. If a course of action, which might involve the U. S. in fighting, cannot be adequately explained, perhaps it should be rethought.

This is the best time to develop an understanding of what medium might best explain a particular development. Where there must be detailed explanation of courses of action, news magazines and newspapers are preferred. Where there's action (such as tanks being tested or weapons being fired), the effort should be made to interest television in covering it. Where speed is essential and a story may be delivered with comparatively few words, radio might best serve. Experienced public affairs people are now on the job to assist in reaching those in the media.

As the planning effort moves toward policy, it falls to a number of people who are knowledgeable about the subject to communicate it to the citizenry. They must approach their task with care, realizing that many who read, listen, or view--reporters included--will have negative views on the subject. They feel that defense spending is too high, or that the money could be better spent elsewhere, or they wonder whether our military is capable of protecting us. But, the effort must be made positively and as candidly as security will permit.

Gaining and maintaining public support for strategic goals is difficult because of the openness of our society. However, the effort must be made during peacetime to establish a rapport with those in journalism who have had little exposure to the military, so that when it is necessary to take up arms, they might report more knowledgeably. Those goals must be clear and easily grasped by the people.

The importance of setting clear strategic goals is just one of many principles laid down by the great Prussian strategic thinker, Carl von Clausewitz. When this nation ignored those principles during our recent involvement in Vietnam, the effort was lost, though we had never been defeated on the battlefield.<sup>1</sup> Even among those who fought in that Southeast Asian conflict there was not a clear idea of why they were there. A 15-24 March 1985 poll by ABC News-Washington Post shows that of the veterans who served there between August 1964 and June 1975, 37 per cent were unclear as to what the war was about.<sup>2</sup>

In accomplishing the first mission of DOD, that of preparing for war, much remains to be done. As we consider the second mission, that of waging war, much has already been done, though a few issues must still be addressed. In peacetime, the planner must consider communicating with the people through a system in place that is outside the control of the government. As we move to a war footing, the same apparatus is in place, but the relationship changes. Sustaining the will of the people will depend upon what they see and hear from the fighting through a group of daring journalists known as war

correspondents. Now equipped with highly mobile video recording equipment and instant satellite communications, war correspondents have the tools to keep the American people well informed on conflicts, whatever their intensity. They also pose new problems to security of operations which must be addressed. Accommodating the war correspondent in future conflicts is an enormous challenge. To give one an appreciation for how this nation should proceed, a look at history is helpful.<sup>3</sup>

A backward glance shows complete swings in the pendulum as the military dealt with those who covered conflicts for the folks at home. Depending upon the involvement, the war correspondent was alternately courted and treated like royalty or reviled by commanders and barred from doing their jobs. Some were viewed as spys and even traitors, while others were proud cheerleaders for their nation's armed forces. They have provided memorable descriptions of battles, spectacular photos, gripping footage, and excellent "lay language" analyses of combat operations. They also have lied, served as spies, fabricated entire battles, staged pictures, ignored atrocities, and, on one occasion, even started a war to improve newspaper circulation!

At times, war correspondents even became part of the action. Canadian James Creelman led a successful bayonet charge upon a Spanish blockhouse during the Spanish-American War.<sup>4</sup> While covering the Spanish Civil War, the strongly anti-Fascist author, Ernest Hemingway, conducted weapons training for recruits of the international brigades, while he was serving as a cor-

respondent.<sup>5</sup> During World War II, Harry Gorrell, Jr., of United Press was awarded the Air Medal for giving first aid to a wounded aircraft gunner while on a bombing run over Greece.<sup>6</sup>

From the very start, war correspondents have been the key factor in whether the people of a nation will continue to support armed involvement. The Crimean War of 1854-56 marks the beginning of an organized effort to report a war to the civilian population at home by a civilian reporter. Prior to that, people learned about conflicts much later through the writings of historians and soldiers who had fought them. Although both points are disputed, William Howard Russell's epitaph in London's St. Paul's Cathedral credits him with being the first and greatest war correspondent.<sup>7</sup> He found British soldiers enduring a Crimean winter without adequate food, clothing, and medical care, while their officers lived in comparative opulence, with a French chef, fine wines, and, in some cases, their wives. Russell effectively communicated that to the home front and the resulting public outrage led to the sacking of the British commander, the aging Lord Raglan.

The first U. S. correspondents were employed in the Civil War. An estimated 500 reported for the North at various times, with ten or fewer on the job for the duration. About 100 reported for the South.<sup>8</sup> Newspapers were often published in the midst of the fighting. Most of the reporting was highly partisan, censorship was loose and potentially damaging information on such things as the movement of units sometimes found its way into print. During his march to the sea, General Sherman, who

hated correspondents, tried to prevent their travelling with him--even threatening to threat them as spies.<sup>9</sup> To their credit, some correspondents on both sides reported on graft and mismanagement which had deprived troops of needed supplies. Others produced poignant descriptions of the terrible violence and suffering of the war. Matthew Brady and other photographers provided a comprehensive treasury of photos of the Union Army, though the papers of that time were incapable of reproducing them.

In the years following the Civil War, American correspondents journeyed worldwide by steamer, train, horse, camel, and dogsled to cover the conflicts that occurred. An Associated Press correspondent, Mark Kellogg, lost his life while with Custer at the Little Big Horn.<sup>10</sup> Correspondents acquired a reputation for being colorful and highly competitive, an image which lasts to this day.

The press was blamed for the start of the next conflict involving the U. S. Newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst strongly supported the Cubans in their rebellion against their Spanish masters. Through his gain of papers, Hearst railed for American support of the revolt. When the U. S. Battleship Maine blew up in Havana harbor, a Spanish call for calm while the matter was investigated was drowned out by the cry, "Remember the Maine!" The U. S. went to war, and Hearst's correspondents were everywhere covering it.<sup>11</sup>

At the start of World War I, Americans were among the neutral correspondents who found it easier to learn of the pro-

gress of the fighting from Germany, rather than Britain or France. The British and French imposed the tightest censorship ever upon their correspondents and coerced the reporters into becoming part of the propaganda effort, glamorizing deadly warfare in trenches that stretched from Switzerland to the English Channel. They protected their high commands from criticism and maintained silence as casualties grew to staggering proportions, in a conflict that no one could figure out how to end. The U. S. maintained its neutrality until a mighty propaganda effort directed her way, picturing Germans as inhuman killers of children and rapers of nuns, eventually convinced Americans to enter the conflict against Germany.

The U. S. correspondent covering the Allied Expeditionary Force did not wear a uniform, but was required to display a green armband with a large red "C". He had to appear personally before the Secretary of War and swear to "convey the truth to the people of the United States." He had to pay the army to cover maintenance and equipment costs, plus a \$10,000 bond to assure his conduct as a "gentleman of the press."<sup>12</sup>

Heavy censorship prevented the American people from learning how poorly armed and supplied the AEF was. Trucks came off ships minus their engines; mules did not have harnesses. Of 4,400 tanks ordered, only 15 reached France. More tragic was a lack of proper uniforms which led to an alarming number of American deaths due to pneumonia, during the bitter winter of 1917-18. When United Press reporter Westbrook Pegler tried to get that information past censors, General Pershing personally

ordered his recall.<sup>13</sup>

As the war in Europe drew to a close, the fighting continued for 300,000 American, French, British Empire, Japanese, Greek, and Eastern European soldiers. They were sent into Russia in an unsuccessful attempt to put down the Bolshevik Revolution. The action caused Russian casualties from the war, famine, and disease to balloon to 14 million. Being forced to fight for a cause they did not understand or believe in, French, British, Canadian, and American soldiers mutinied. U. S. forces were finally withdrawn on 1 April 1920 from a conflict that American encyclopedias would not describe until decades later. Knowing about it today gives us some appreciation for the extreme distrust the U. S. S. R. holds for our country now.<sup>14</sup>

American correspondents were on hand for Italy's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia and reflected U. S. sympathy for those there who defended with spears against modern weapons. The following year, they were in Spain to cover brutal fighting when the Spanish army, led by Francisco Franco, and supported by the aristocracy and Roman Catholic Church, set about to topple a democratically-elected government, backed by workers, peasants, writers, and Communists. Russia came to the aid of the Loyalist Republican government, while fascist Germany and Italy came to the aid of Franco's Nationalists in a dress rehearsal for World War II. Volunteers came from several countries: America's contingent was known as the American Lincoln Brigade. They fought for the Republican cause and most correspondents who were there were strongly pro-Republican.<sup>15</sup>



When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the American people--reporters included--rallied behind the nation's armed services in an unprecedented show of support. Termed "our last patriotic war," the effort was awesome. We were fighting on two fronts thousands of miles from our shores. The nation's survival was on the line and the goal was clear to everyone: the resounding defeat of the Axis Powers.

War correspondents during World War II became "cheerleaders" for the allied cause. They were given the honorary grade of an officer, wore uniforms with "War Correspondent" tabs, were moved, quartered, and fed at government expense. Also, the military furnished the equipment for them to file their stories and photos from the theaters of war. They submitted themselves to censorship so rigid, that commanders soon felt comfortable in divulging the most sensitive information of operations to them. In fact, a commander often considered the correspondents assigned to him to be a part of his staff. General Eisenhower had that view: "At my first press conference as Supreme Commander, I told the war correspondents that once they were accredited to my headquarters, I considered them quasi-staff officers."<sup>16</sup>

Stories critical of the effort did find their way into print at times. However, since censorship prevented the release of any information which might provide comfort to the enemy, reports of atrocities on our side, mistakes, poor judgment, or criticism of the war's lack of progress were kept from the American people. If there was one glaring drawback in the coverage of World War II, it was that there were simply not

enough correspondents to cover all the action.

A bare five years after World War II, American correspondents were in uniform again to cover the invasion of South Korea by troops from North Korea. General MacArthur had been authorized to impose censorship, but refused to do so. Instead he instructed the newspeople to be their own censors. He warned them that if they broke security or made "unwarranted criticisms," they would be held responsible personally.<sup>17</sup> No one was pleased by the policy and news bureau chiefs quietly petitioned the general to impose censorship and he complied.

U. S. forces made up much of the unprepared United Nations army which reeled, first before the North Koreans, then the Chinese. In a precursor to Vietnam, American troops were committed to fight in a war where the goal was not victory. Poorly indoctrinated servicemen fell victim to "brainwashing" and a breakdown in unit integrity once they had been captured. For the first time, television was used to cover a war, although its news was not timely and lacked impact. The war ended along roughly the same lines that it had begun and talks continue at Panmunjom.

The reporting of the horrors of the war by correspondents was unhampered. As the war progressed, the military moved from an unworkable code of voluntary censorship to a compulsory review of press and radio reports. Mild rebukes were handed down in the very few cases where there were security breaches.

The Vietnam War came during--and contributed to--a period of massive social and political upheaval in the U. S. Initial-

ly supported by most Americans, including most war correspondents, frustration grew as it dragged on without resolution. There were some 2,000 correspondents from many countries accredited to cover the fighting. For many of them, it was dangerous. Forty-five correspondents lost their lives; eighteen are still listed as missing.<sup>18</sup>

Few stayed in the field for long periods, but had to return to Saigon to file their stories. There were no uniforms, other than those put together by the reporters themselves. They caught rides to where the action was aboard military transportation when there were seats available. Military public affairs personnel assigned correspondents to commands usually down to battalion level, only when the commander agreed to accept them. The commander could also order stories held until he was certain the security of his operation would not be jeopardized. The correspondent in Vietnam was not censored in the traditional sense and was allowed access to the battlefield participants that was unprecedented. A chief U. S. spokesman in Saigon, Barry Zorthian, later contended that violations of security were few:

In the four years that I was in Vietnam, with some 2,000 correspondents accredited, we had only four or five cases of violations . . . of tactical military information. Our leverage was the lifting of credentials, and that was done only in four or five cases and at least two or three of those were simply unintentional errors on the part of the correspondent. There was only once or twice that censorship as such was deliberately challenged and the correspondent's credentials were immediately lifted.<sup>19</sup>

Television came of age in Vietnam. Unfortunately, the medium does not adapt itself, because of viewer interest, to the presentation of the "big picture." It best relays action, so viewers back home became accustomed only to the explosions, flames, whirling rotorblades, and gunfire. For the first time, in living color, Americans watching in their livingrooms saw war as it really is, with blood flowing and people really dying. Without a clear national objective for being there before them, their view of the necessity of the war gradually changed. Television was not the only reason for that, but it was a significant one. The legacy of Vietnam is a rift between the military and the news media which will take still more time to heal. It's doubtful that, barring another major conflict where the nation's survival is imperilled, it will ever be restored to what it was forty years ago.

It was the Vietnam legacy which colored U. S. government actions in the next major involvement of the military. The tiny Caribbean island of Granada had gone through a period of increasing instability following its independence from Britain in 1974. By June 1983, the government was Marxist and Cubans were building a 9,000-foot runway for use by Soviet military aircraft. By October, Eastern Caribbean national leaders were so concerned that they appealed to our government to intervene. On 25 October, the president announced a pre-dawn invasion four hours earlier of Granada to accomplish a threefold mission: the rescue of more than 600 American medical students (no one was aware of still more on a second campus), to facilitate the

the rescue of Governor General Paul Scoon, and to neutralize the Granadian People's Revolutionary Army and secure the island.<sup>20</sup> Absent for the first time from a major U. S. military operation were correspondents for the mass media. Public affairs officers were not consulted during the hasty planning for Operation Urgent Fury, and there was no public affairs annex in the operations order.

Representatives of news agencies were outraged. The nation was left to learn of developments from the dispatches of military sources and from amateur radio operators on the island. Reporters who tried to enter Granada by small boat the day of the operation were turned away and taken into custody. It was two and a half days after the start of Urgent Fury before the first pool of correspondents was allowed in. By 27 October, 369 American and foreign journalists were in Bridgetown, Barbados waiting to go in. That's roughly the number accredited to Eisenhower's Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force in May 1944, prior to the Normandy invasion.<sup>21</sup>

Although some Americans called the invasion unwarranted, most felt the attack was appropriate, especially the students who were rescued. Military planners had been given a short fuse to put the combined-services operation together and that provided the two reasons given by our nation's top military leaders for excluding the press. Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger maintained that the "safety" of correspondents could not be guaranteed. At the same news conference, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John W. Vessey, stated,

"We were going in there very quickly and needed to have 'surprise' in order to have it be successful."<sup>22</sup> Of course, Granada Radio had broadcast for all the Caribbean to hear warnings of the invasion for several days prior to it taking place.

Out of the invasion of Granada have come some positive developments to be considered by the strategic planner. In November 1983, Vessey asked retired Army Maj. Gen. Winant Sidle, a former public affairs chief in Vietnam to bring together a panel of news representatives and military public affairs officers to make recommendations regarding the question: "How do we conduct military operations in a manner that safeguards the lives of our military and protects the security of a military operation while keeping the American public informed through the news media?"<sup>23</sup>

The press determined it would be inappropriate for working reporters and editorial personnel to sit on such a government-sponsored panel, so seven former reporters or news executives were chosen. On the military side were representatives of each of the services, the Office of Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), and representatives from the Organization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. During five days of meetings in early February 1984, at Fort McNair in Washington D. C., the commission heard from 28 top-level news executives from 18 news organizations, the top public affairs officers from the military services, and written comments from another 24 news organizations and other experts.<sup>24</sup>

The panel's report offered eight recommendations. Among

key items: Public affairs planning should be made concurrently with the operational planning. If a pool is the only way to provide media access to a military operation, it should be as large as possible and should be maintained only as long as necessary. Media access should depend upon the media's voluntary compliance with security guidelines. Public affairs planning should include sufficient equipment and personnel to assist correspondents. Planners should strive to accommodate journalists as early as possible and should plan to furnish them transportation. Finally, in an effort to bridge a long-standing gulf, the panel also recommended members of military public affairs and news organizations should meet to discuss their differences.<sup>25</sup>

No size for the initial pool is stated, so for a very rapid response, it could be as few as two wire service reporters, one a writer, the other a photographer. Gen. Sidle feels 12 to 13 might be more reasonable for most operations--to be expanded as quickly as the capability to accommodate them expands. He adds, "There are going to be certain situations where I believe you're going to have a limit of some kind and I think it should be a very generous limit."<sup>26</sup>

The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), Col. Robert O'Brien, calls the first test of a media pool just over a year after Granada a "disaster" for both the press and the military. Permission had to be sought from Honduras for the entry of the correspondents and the resulting inquiries led to a breakdown of security. Twelve newsmen were flown from Andrews Air Force Base to a 101st Airborne exercise underway at

Fort Campbell, Kentucky, in September 1985. There were no breaches of security during this second test of the pool arrangement. At this writing, a third is being prepared. The machinery is now in place to provide coverage at very short notice of U. S. military involvements.

A final consideration for the strategic planner is field press censorship. The Sidle panel's recommendation in this area was to have "escort officers" accompany correspondents in the field. Gen. Sidle calls viewing television tape by such officers "a mild form of censorship, so the person shooting the tape does not have to make his own judgements."<sup>27</sup> While some correspondents will no doubt object to escort officers, most will welcome someone else assuming the responsibility for complying with security needs.

At this time, the military is incapable of imposing field press censorship. Following World War II, the responsibility was given to units of the U. S. Army Reserve. They drew personnel into their ranks who had had experience during wartime with censorship. During the 1970s, a series of defense secretaries questioned the need for such units and by the end of the decade, they were "zeroed out" (they are there on paper, but have no personnel). That reservoir of experience is rapidly disappearing. Precautions have been taken to store away what they've written, so, according to Gen. Sidle, "It won't be a complete start from scratch. But no one has been training in that area."<sup>28</sup> Field press censorship might be desirable in some situations, but the ability to impose it is not there.



In an open society, the task of the strategic planner to gain and maintain public support for national interest objectives is a difficult one. During peacetime, when the mission of the Department of Defense is to prepare for war, the activities of the military are closely scrutinized, as they should be. The effort must be made to clearly define our goals and objectives, then to communicate them in the most effective way possible to the people. That way, of course, is through the independent mass media of the nation. It involves an educational effort for those in the media at every level, from local communities to those who reach a national audience.

The second mission of DOD is to wage war. Because of the security necessary during wartime operations, the task of communicating with the people may be somewhat easier, because more control will be exercised over the media. An appreciation of the role of the war correspondent and the relationship he has had with the U. S. military from the Civil War forward helps the planner to determine what the relationship might be in the future. Depending upon the level of intensity of the military conflict, the correspondent can be expected to approach his job with any attitude from cheerleader to cynic. A military escort officer will determine if news he has gathered violates security, but full field press censorship is not a present reality. In future conflicts, consideration will have to be given to new technology: videotape ready immediately to be played, instantaneous satellite communications from anywhere in the world, and the ability to file stories outside a battle zone.

Finally, the strategic planner must realize that Americans, especially after Vietnam, have a deep reluctance to get entangled militarily anywhere. If fighting is necessary, they express the desire to "get in and get it over with." They have no desire to participate in an open-ended, interminable involvement. Their perceptions in peacetime are formed by the mass media; in wartime by the war correspondent. The strategic planner, amid all his other responsibilities, must never lose sight of that fact.



## FOOTNOTES

1. Harry G. Summers, Jr., On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context, a superb study in detail of Clausewitzian principles which were ignored during that conflict.
2. "Half Don't Understand Viet War," Helena Independent Record, 14 August 1985, p. 4.
3. Phillip Knightly, The First Casualty, an excellent study of the war correspondent from the Crimean War to Vietnam.
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6. Ibid., p. 316.
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9. R. S. Thorndike, The Sherman Letters, p. 189.
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11. Knightly, Casualty, p. 56.
12. B. Hershey, "Sons o' Guns of August," Dateline, pp. 44-45.
13. O. R. Pilat, Pegler, Angry Man of the Press, p. 77.
14. Knightly, Casualty, pp. 157-161.
15. Ibid., p. 193.
16. Peter Braestrup, Battlelines, p. 34.
17. Ibid., p. 50.
18. Knightly, Casualty, 2nd photo section.
19. Vietnam: 10 Years Later, p. 52.
20. Braestrup, Battlelines, p. 92.
21. Ibid., p. 101.
22. Ibid., p. 112.
23. Winant Sidle, "The Military and the Press: Is the Breach Worth Mending?" Army, p. 23.

24. Ibid., p. 25.
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26. Interview with Winant Sidle, MG (Ret.), 7 November 1985.
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